

Creating a New Society

We need to change our strategy



by Paul M. Weyrich

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In February, I wrote a [letter](#) to cultural conservative leaders across America that caused something of a stir. In essence, I said that we need to change our strategy. Instead of relying on politics to retake the culturally and morally decadent institutions of contemporary America, I said that we should separate from those institutions and build our own.

A number of commentators, including some in *World*, misread what I said as a call to give up the fight. Most recently, in a thoughtful piece which I agreed with in part, Gene Edward Veith summed up my recommendation as "separate from a corrupt culture, and wait for a better time."

The misreading here is in the word *wait*. Waiting is passive and I never said we should be passive. On the contrary, the call I issued, to build our own institutions based on Christian values, is a call for a great deal of action. It means building our own schools, media, entertainment, universities, every institution people need in order to live good lives. It means, in short, doing nothing less than the early Christians did within the Roman Empire: creating a new society within the ruins of the old.

For three centuries, the Christian church established itself and grew despite not only the decadence of imperial Rome, but in the face of active persecution as well. How did it do so? By the power of example: by Christian witness. The early Christians created a separate, distinct culture and community within the empire.

They were not wholly separate. Christians served in Rome's legions. They paid Roman taxes. They often strived to show they were good citizens.

But at the same time, Christians built their own communities, largely by serving and protecting each other. Of course, they gathered for worship, often clandestinely. But they formed communities in many other ways as well. They supported each other through Christian charity. They instructed each other. Roman Christians socialized mostly with other Christians; it would have been difficult to do otherwise, given the nature of pagan Roman entertainment. Signs, such as a fish drawn in the sand at the doorway, invited Christians into other Christians' homes and businesses. The early Christians were conscious of being "set apart" -- which is, after all, what the word *holy* means. They knew they were, while still Roman citizens, part of something else, of a community based on faith, not politics or geography. They knew it in the catacombs, certainly, but not only there.

Did these early Christians then commit the sin of hiding their light under a bushel, of not taking up the fight against the world, the flesh and the devil? Not at all. Had they done that, the church would have dwindled and disappeared. On the contrary, the early Christians understood that the most powerful weapon in their arsenal was the power of example, the example of lives well lived. By rejecting the rampant vice of imperial Rome and clinging to virtue, even at the expense of martyrdom, they ensured that the

Christian community would be a beacon. In time, it would draw more and more people out of the pagan Roman culture into the new Christian culture. So well did this strategy work that by the fourth century the Roman Empire gave up the fight and, under the Emperor Constantine, legalized the Christian religion.

If I had been criticized for calling on Christians and other Americans who still believe in and live by the old rules of our traditional, Western culture to do too much, to take on a task too vast for their talents and their energies, I could understand that. I would respectfully disagree: The early Christians did as much and more, and, so far at least, we are not facing actual martyrdom for such activities. But when critics say in supposed response to me that "before striking our colors in the culture wars, Christians should at least put up a fight," I am puzzled. Of course they should. That is exactly what I am urging them to do. The question is not whether we should fight, but how.

And the answer I am offering is precisely the answer the early church offered. We fight against the decadence and immorality of contemporary American culture most powerfully, most effectively, when we create within it islands of sanity, of goodness, of Christian living. That does not mean we give up politics, any more than Saint Paul gave up his Roman citizenship. It means, rather, that we recognize that the witness of lives lived well is more powerful than politics, American politics or the politics of Roman Emperors.

In Rome, that strategy, pursued despite countless martyrdoms, led to Constantine and the cross: *In Hoc Signo Vincit*. Here, with God's help, it may lead to an America that we can once again recognize as our own country.

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Read Paul Weyrich's letter to conservatives that sparked this follow-up article. [Click here.](#)

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